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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000330

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [YM](#) [DOMESTIC](#) [POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION TESTS LIMITS OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER

REF: 2005 SANAA 2766

Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Parliament is preparing for its next session with a highly anticipated leadership race. Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar is widely expected to win re-election as Speaker, but reformers are looking to defeat President Saleh's candidates for the Deputy positions. Such a rebellion could raise the legislature's profile and increase competition in the Yemeni political scene. Hamid al-Ahmar, the Speaker's son, says calls for legislative independence are premature, but the opposition parties are serious about running a candidate in this year's presidential race. It remains to be seen if these challenges will materialize, but many MPs and opposition figures are increasingly willing to test the limits of Saleh's power and to discuss his eventual replacement. END SUMMARY.

Parliament Steps up to the Plate...

2. (C) Parliament is set to meet for the first session of 2006, and its first order of business will be electing new leadership. In its last session, Parliament took the unprecedented step of overriding a presidential veto to pass new by-laws. Some observers suggest that President Saleh may have engineered the vote himself in a complicated attempt to dilute the Speaker's influence. Nevertheless, the new by-laws clearly increase legislative powers, including election of the Speaker and the three Deputy Speakers who together form the Presidium. (NOTE: The Presidium has broad powers in deciding which laws are debated and what demands are made of the executive. END NOTE). Saadaldin Talib, parliamentary advisor for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and former MP, said the by-laws give Parliament more power than at any other time in its 16-year history. MPs of all parties supported the by-laws because they included a generous benefits package -- a legislative maneuver engineered by reform-minded MPs meeting under the auspices of NDI's MEPI-funded program.

3. (C) All expectations are that Parliament will re-elect Sheikh Abdullah, leader of the opposition Islah Party, to another term as Speaker (reduced by the new by-laws from six to two years). The ruling General People's Congress (GPC) has indicated that they will support al-Ahmar for another term, despite the fact that he represents an opposition party. This was a clear signal from Saleh, who wanted to chasten al-Ahmar by shortening the Speaker's term, but retain him in his position nonetheless. Sheikh Abdullah is thought to be unhappy about having to retain his post through competitive elections, having been chosen for his post in 1993 with Saleh's support by unanimous consent. Talib predicted that the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) would run an opposition candidate if only to establish the precedent. With al-Ahmar undergoing medical treatment in Saudi Arabia, Parliament has delayed the session by at least one week awaiting his return.

...Will MPs Take a Swing at the President?

4. (C) The fate of the other three members of the Presidium is less certain. Most contentious is the re-election of Yahya al-Rai, generally regarded "President Saleh's man" on the Presidium. In 2005, MPs were regularly frustrated by Rai's obstruction of reform legislation and corruption inquiries. A vote against Rai would be considered a minor rebellion against presidential authority and a clear declaration of independence by the legislative branch. Carlo Binda, head of NDI's parliamentary program, said a change in leadership would allow Parliament to take a more aggressive line on issues such as corruption and fiscal decentralization. Hamid al-Ahmar, the Speaker's son and a leading figure in Islah, countered that the opposition is not yet ready for such a stand, and will in all likelihood re-elect Rai. "Because of their close relationship," said Hamid, "my father cannot personally allow his supporters to oppose the President directly. His followers and the President's want to fight each other, and the leaders spend much of their time trying to restrain them." (NOTE: The al-Ahmars head the powerful Hashid tribal confederation. END NOTE).

Opposition Considers Presidential Challenge

15. (C) The real challenge, said Hamid, will come in the Presidential election and from a new generation of politicians. The opposition is serious about fielding an opposition candidate in the 2006 presidential election, claimed Hamid, who has already submitted a number of suggestions to the opposition's Joint Meeting Party (JMP) for consideration. According to Hamid, relations within the JMP have never been better, and there is more common ground between the Nasserites, the Yemeni Socialist Party, and the Islamist Islah party than he ever thought possible. Dr. Aziz, a high-ranking member of the YSP in Sanaa, confirmed this assessment. Frustration among political elites, both inside and outside government, is at an all-time high, said Hamid. Ninety percent would like to see Saleh gone, he continued, but don't know who can replace him.

Ahmar Views the Future in Moderation...

16. (C) Hamid made clear that such leadership was not going to come for Sheikh Zindani and the extremist wing of the Islah party. "Zindani a great man," said Hamid. "One of the most knowledgeable men in Yemen on the ways of Islam. I love to sit at his feet and listen to his sermons," said Hamid. "But the time is not right for such a leader, and most members of Islah know this. We need someone who has the support of both the Americans and the Saudis." What we need now, said Hamid, is someone who can clean up corruption and help bring development to Yemen. He did not offer specific names of candidates under consideration, but others have suggested that it would have to be someone with strong tribal and financial backing, who did not fear retribution from Saleh.

...And Probes U.S. Support

17. (C) Given the control that Saleh and the GPC have over the electoral system, the opposition has no delusions of winning an outright victory, explained Hamid. Instead, he is hoping for a "Ukrainian scenario." If we can take 30 to 40 percent of the vote, said Hamid, we can then claim voter fraud and ask for international intervention, specifically from the United States. "We know that your support for Saleh does not run deep," continued Hamid, "and that backing a corrupt regime is not in your long-term interest."

18. (C) COMMENT: In many ways, Parliament's plan to re-elect Sheikh Abdullah is business as usual in Yemen, where the President and the Sheikh have a long-standing power-sharing agreement. (Reftel) There are also considerable doubts as to whether Islah is truly ready to oppose Saleh, or whether the party is simply looking to improve its bargaining position in relation to the GPC when it forms the next government. At the same time, tectonic plates are slowly shifting in Yemeni politics, with a growing willingness to challenge President Saleh -- if only on trivial matters. If Parliament rejects Saleh's candidates for the Presidium, it could usher in a new era of political competition in Yemen. This has the potential to spill over into the presidential election, and could begin the long process of determining Saleh's successor. END COMMENT.
Krajeski